

Crime and pun: moral evasion in lolita

Experience, Human Nature



You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. So says Humbert Humbert at the start of *Lolita* in his account to the “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury” (9). He refers to himself as a murderer (he is, after all, “guilty of killing Quilty”), not as a rapist, the far more serious offense Lolita levels at him. That I, and everyone else who reads the book, call Dolores Haze by the name “Lolita” demonstrates the efficacy of Humbert’s fancy prose style – under the spell of his aesthetic mastery, we, the jury, must bend to his subjective vision through memory, and thus we see the twelve-year-old nymphet as Lolita, as she is in Humbert’s arms. It is difficult to castigate Humbert when we see the world through his European eyes. Humbert’s main strength is his sense of humor. Nabokov is sure to throw Humbert’s way all the American kitsch he can handle – mostly in the form of Charlotte Haze. His sly insults sail over her head, but Humbert wins our approval by making sure we understand them. Similarly, we admire him because we must recognize that he is above us, too – untangling “Vladimir Nabokov” from “Vivian Darkbloom” may seem easy once it has been pointed out, but there are scores more that are worth the reader’s time (or not, as the case may be). His graceful facility with other languages mocks our desire to have his control over English, not even his native tongue (or Nabokov’s). His humor constantly deflects attention from the seriousness of his crime. When Humbert calls himself a “pentapod,” the image of him as a sexual predator is offset by the work we must do to appreciate the inventive coinage of the word. His poetry obscures his perversity; he is not the rapist – Freud is the(rapist). Humbert is always moving us sideways with his playful and conscious malapropian language, “watering” his car by his “west-door”

neighbors. Humanity is defined by its capacity to play, the demonstration of an individual freedom which has no value for anyone else. But Humbert's play has value for us, since we are enchanted as youthful readers (Nabokov believes that all stories should be fairy tales of some sort), just as Humbert's play attempts to keep Lolita forever young. Humbert's poetry even lets down his guard at times, drawing us further to his side: " And presently I was driving through the drizzle of the dying day, with the windshield wipers in full action but unable to cope with my tears" (280). Humbert's control over language also extends to his control over the novel and, one might argue, over the actual events. At an inconsequential moment, Humbert writes "' Doublecrosser,' [Lolita] said as I crawled downstairs rubbing my arm with a great show of rue" (65). Charlotte is struck by a car crossing the street, and this event was foreshadowed by Humbert nearly hitting a dog when he first pulled up to the house – the double fatal crossing of the street (there is also a dominant motif of doubling throughout the novel, Nabokov's parody of the European doppelganger tale, but for our purposes we will look only at its relationship to the street). This may seem a stretch, but " rue" is also French for " street." This precision makes us wonder if Humbert is fabricating parts of his story. The number 342 recurs constantly, as house numbers, hotel room numbers, days on the road, and so on, and can be viewed as either a series of fatidic checkpoints through which Humbert must travel, or as his authorial revision of the events within his prison. In either case, the reader is the true prisoner, caught up in Humbert's web and turning him from anti-hero to hero. We cannot judge him harshly; the true punishment he receives for his crime is not imprisonment but " coronary thrombosis" (3), or a broken

heart. This, too, told to us in the foreword, only brings us closer to the silver-tongued rapist.